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SUBJECT: WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY: DCM DISCUSSES U.S. JOURNALISM AT
LAO-AMERICAN CENTER

Ref: STATE 055366

11. (U) SUMMARY: To mark World Press Freedom Day, the DCM spoke with a group of roughly 15 college students at the Lao-American Center on May 2 about the history of press freedom in the United States and the ethical dilemmas faced by media organizations. This was a timely subject, since the Lao National Assembly is getting ready to debate a new media law. END SUMMARY.

12. The DCM addressed about 15 students at the Lao-American Center on May 2 in observance of World Press Freedom Day. Drawing from her experiences working for a television news organization before joining the Foreign Service, she discussed the historical roots of freedom of the press in America and provided an overview of the shift from partisan journalism to the ideal of "objective" reporting. She gave students copies of the International Herald Tribune and asked them to try to identify the opinion pages. The DCM noted that early American newspapers were often reckless and irresponsible and discussed the difficult issues of balancing freedom and social responsibility. In the United States, she said, the press has sometimes agreed to withhold sensitive information but on other occasions has successfully argued in court for the right to publish. She described specific situations, including the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Pentagon Papers publication, when news organizations had to weigh national security concerns against the public's right to know. She noted that other countries have different laws, regulations, and cultural norms governing what news organizations can publish. These issues are of particular interest for Laos, she said, since the National Assembly is getting ready to debate a new media law.

13. (U) Finally, the students got into groups, took on the roles of senior editors and producers at major media outlets, and debated whether they would publicize certain controversial material. Using scenarios based on news organizations' dilemmas over whether to publish the Unabomber manifesto, the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad, and the Virginia Tech video, the students debated whether the information they were considering publishing was sensitive to other cultures, whether the public would want to see the information, and if the information would (in the case of the cartoons) create public disturbances or (in the case of the Unabomber manifesto) save lives. Each group then reported on the decisions its members would make as leaders in this difficult business.

14. (SBU) Comment: Given Laos's Communist political system, press freedom is a sensitive subject. The DCM deliberately refrained from discussing the state of press freedom in Laos and chose non-political scenarios for the group discussions. Nevertheless, the discussion of press freedom in the United States clearly conveyed American values. Lao students tend to be reluctant to speak in class, but we were impressed with the level of

sophistication that many of them displayed during the group discussions. In most cases, their arguments and decisions were similar to those made by real-life journalists. Embassy Vientiane will submit the PowerPoint presentation from this discussion to Regional Information Resources Officer Linda Parker for inclusion on the IRC website.

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